

JEFF HEALEY'S MELBOURNE JAZZ ODYSSEY

Jeff Healey (the blind Canadian rock guitarist) surprised Melbourne audiences recently by appearing at jazz venues armed with a trumpet or cornet, and jamming with local bands. He also saluted a virtually unknown local guitarist, Ben Rogers, whom he invited onstage to play with him during his final Melbourne concert.

How did all this come to pass? In 1985 I first met Jeff Healey at Grossman's Tavern in Toronto. I was playing banjo with the resident jazz band, "Kid" Bastien's Happy Pals, one of that city's oldest jazz groups (I was in Toronto completing postgraduate studies). Jeff used to sit-in with the band on trumpet, and whilst I always enjoyed his jazz playing, I was only vaguely aware that he was also an accomplished rock guitarist.

When Jeff recently arrived in Sydney at the start of his Australian tour, he called me and asked if I could introduce him to Melbourne's remarkably thriving traditional jazz scene. (In fact, for a city of this size, Melbourne likely has more dedicated traditional jazz musicians and followers than most anywhere else in the world.) I arranged a meeting with guitarist Ben Rogers, another old friend who had recently arrived in Melbourne via Perth. Ben's musical interests include rock and roll in addition to thirties jazz (especially the music of Django Reinhardt) so I thought there would be some common ground.

I took Jeff to meet Ben at his home in Middle Park, and the two guitarists immediately started jamming, running through a few standards and a couple of Ben's compositions. We then piled into Ben's '55 Ford Customline for the trip to one of Melbourne's foremost jazz venues, The Fountain Inn in Port Melbourne. The resident Black Adder Jazz Band happily invited Jeff onstage, and with a trumpet kindly loaned by another local muso (Rob Reid), Jeff joined the band for the last set. One of the high points was Jeff's fine rendition of *Melancholy Blues*.

The following night was the Jeff Healey concert at the Palais Theatre. This show was a sellout and another show was organised for the next weekend, following concerts in Brisbane and Perth. During the Palais concert, Jeff told the audience that he had had a jam session the previous night with a local guitarist who "blew him away". He urged them to "watch out for this guy, whose name is Ben Rogers". This was quite a surprise to Ben, who was sitting quietly in the audience. Before leaving town, Jeff also invited Ben to join him onstage at his next Melbourne concert on Easter Sunday. Ben's plans for the Easter weekend were hastily reorganised!

I had also put Jeff in touch with Roger Beilby, the operator of Melbourne's best known specialist jazz record store, Mainly Jazz in St Kilda, who was able to supply him with a wide selection of 78rpm records to add to Jeff's 13,000+ collection back in Toronto. When Jeff returned to Melbourne on Good Friday, he had picked up still more 78s in Fremantle. We all met that evening at The Fountain Inn where Stephen Grant's New Orleans Five were entertaining a capacity crowd. Jeff had his own instrument this time (a cornet—a birthday present from his band) and once again he joined the band for a great jam session.

The evening concluded with a late night party in Jeff's hotel room, our host tirelessly cranking the handle of a portable gramophone (provided by local drummer Ken Farmer) to listen to his new 78s.

Jeff was invited to be a guest on the 3PBS Movin' & Groovin' Show the following day. This forties-style radio show is broadcast live from the Gershwin Room at the Esplanade Hotel each Saturday afternoon. Ben Rogers and Jeff joined the Swinging Sidewalks and vocalist Kerri Simpson for part of the show. Saturday night found us once again in Port Melbourne, where Jeff and Ben joined the Aloha Bros for the last set at The Fountain Inn.

Sunday night was Jeff's final appearance in Melbourne—a concert at the Palace (in St Kilda). This show was even more energetic than the Palais concert. Jeff provided tickets for his new found Melbourne friends (including the staff of The Fountain Inn). Ben was asked on stage for the finale of the show, and the two guitarists jamming together produced a terrific response from the crowd.

Jeff departed Melbourne on Easter Monday plotting his next visit. We were all sorry to see him go. We look forward to that return visit. He's a natural—as a person and as a muso.

Richard Cullen

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